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Administration must do more on car mileage, senators say

By H. JOSEF HEBERT, Associated Press Writer

Senators called for an increase in automobile fuel economy Tuesday and accused the Bush administration of trailing behind the marketplace in opposing significant increases.

Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., ridiculed the administration's characterization of its recent increase in small truck and SUV mileage as "bold" saying it amounts to a 1.8 miles per gallon boost over the next four years.

With motorists using nearly half of the country's oil and U.S. gasoline prices at crisis-level for some families, "shouldn't there be a bolder approach" to fuel savings, she asked Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta.

Mineta, at a Senate Commerce Committee hearing, reiterated the administration's opposition to imposing tougher mileage requirements on cars until federal fuel economy rules are changed to make them more flexible for industry.

Currently automakers must meet a fleet average for passenger cars of 27.5 miles per gallon, a standard enacted by Congress in 1975 in response to the oil shocks unleashed by the Arab oil embargo.

"The president and I are committed to improving fuel economy across the board through an open regulatory process built upon sound science and economics, but we will not accept an arbitrary statutory increase under the current passenger cars system," Mineta told the committee.

The 27.5 mpg standard "was not, and certainly is not now based on sound science or economics," Mineta said. President Bush has asked Congress to allow the Transportation Department to revamp the program so it can impose a sliding scale requirement taking into account different vehicle sizes.

It was that kind of approach that was taken in the recent increases in SUV and small truck mileage rules that require automakers to increase the mileage for those vehicles by 1.8 mpg to 24 mpg beginning with the 2011 model year.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., called such an increase "abysmal" in view of the technological advances available to automakers and with gasoline prices at more than \$3 a gallon in many places across the country.

"Everyone knows the technology is so far ahead of you," she told Mineta, noting that some manufacturers are making pickups that get 38 mpg. "You are so far behind what's even happening in the marketplace."

Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, said a National Academy of Sciences study in 2001 concluded substantial mileage increases could be made using today's technology.

"What is the resistance, your reluctance?" Snowe asked. She said she plans to press for legislation requiring a 10 mpg fuel economy increase for passenger vehicles.

But Mineta said that by law he is required to "take into consideration the total picture," including any impact new requirements would have on highway safety and auto industry jobs and companies' economic health.

In any case, he said, an increase in the Corporate Average Fuel Economy requirements as the mileage rules are formally called would not have any impact on today's gas prices.

Developing new rules would take at least a year and then cannot be required for 18 months to give manufacturers adequate lead time, he said.

Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., asked Mineta if he had a goal for auto mileage.

"I can't come up with a miles per gallon," Mineta replied.

What about in terms of oil savings, the senator persisted. Mineta said he couldn't do that either without detailed analysis of a specific increase in mileage.

The auto industry cautioned that vehicle fuel economy should not be viewed as a panacea to combating high gasoline prices.

"The most effective approach to pursuing reductions in U.S. gasoline consumption is to expand the availability of alternative fuels such as ethanol" and promote the sale of vehicles such as gas-electric hybrids that have gained widespread consumer appeal, said Frederick Webber of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers.

Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, a private consumer advocacy group, said Congress should require an increase of passenger car fuel economy to at least 32.5 mpg by 2009 and higher standards in subsequent years.

"Both car and light truck fuel economy can be improved without sacrificing safety," insisted Claybrook, who was head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration when it imposed the first CAFE requirements in the mid-1970s.